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Letter of the Superior General: Lent 1999

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Lent 1999

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world

My very dear Brothers,

May the peace and strength of the Risen Lord be with you in this season!

Lent accents the cost of discipleship. Right from the beginning Jesus cries out: "Whoever wishes to be my follower must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps" (Lk 9:23). Each Lent Jesus calls us to set out on a journey to Jerusalem, asking us to bear the cross with him. Along the way he speaks to us, through the daily readings, about the deepest meaning of life. Life is easily misinterpreted, he says. In fact, its deepest meaning is often precisely the opposite of what people think. Self-fulfillment comes through self-emptying. Amassing riches can be enslaving; giving them away can be liberating. The last are first, the first last; the poor are the real kings, queens, and presidents in Jesus' eyes. Saving one's life means losing it; we must be immersed into Jesus' death before emerging into the joy of his resurrection.

The grace of following Christ, Lent tells us, is costly. Over the years, in this season, I have often reread a striking passage from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship*, written a few years before he was imprisoned by the Nazi Regime:

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace.... Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. It is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without Church discipline, communion without contrition, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it someone will gladly go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake someone will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble. It is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Let me suggest two thoughts about the grace God offers us as we enter this Lenten time.

1. On the deepest level, grace is neither cheap nor costly. It is utterly free. That is the basic significance of baptism, which the Church celebrates at the Easter Vigil and also offers to countless infants and adults in the course of the year. Baptism says: God loves you from the beginning. The grace it sacramentalizes is God's self-communication. We receive not just gifts, but God's very being. We become the place of the divine indwelling. God loves us and we love God in return _ that is the meaning of grace.

This gift, Lent assures us, is not merely a future share in the life of the Lord, promised to us now but experienced only later. The gift is ours from the start. It is utterly gratuitous. It cannot be earned. While asceticism is surely necessary in life, as all the great religious traditions attest, we must never allow it, or any other "good works," to blur the central Christian truth: "God has loved us first" (1 Jn 4:10; 4:19). Grace is pure gift. "Otherwise," St. Paul tells us, "grace is not grace" (Rom 11:6b).

Though God is utterly transcendent, do we not *experience* the self-communication of God at times? Are there not powerful moments in which we sense our own need for healing and redemption? Do we not long for some type of self-transcendence? Looking back at times, do we not perceive that we have been transformed by events that were beyond our control, often by our contact with the poor, by their faith, their gratitude, their persistent trust in God's presence and providence? Are there not "angels" who enter our lives and touch us deeply because of their authentic witness to the gospels, because of their persevering hope in the face of sickness, suffering, and death? Are there not occasions when we are deeply touched by the loyalty of friends, by their faithful love? Are these not ways in which we glimpse God's freely-bestowed presence in our own human experience? I suggest this Lent that we all focus on growing in awareness of God's self-gift, in its many expressions, and raise our hearts and voices to the Lord in gratitude.

2. But, paradoxically, while grace is utterly free, it is also very costly. God's loving presence is cleansing, as baptism and penance (often called in ancient times "second baptism") remind us. God's love labors to break down the resistance that it finds within us. It is a creative love that works toward change, transformation, new beginnings. A good-humored friend of mine, the Master General of the Dominicans, wrote recently:

In the last century, the English upper classes used to dread getting a letter from the King or Queen announcing that they would like to come to stay. You could not just put them in the spare bedroom. Usually you had to pull down half the house, build twenty more bedrooms and install baths. One hostess, who had rebuilt the whole house to receive the King, asked him nervously whether everything was all right, and he replied, majestically, "Madame, I would be grateful of a hook on the bathroom door for my dressing gown."

God wants to make a home within us. Lent emphasizes the need to renovate the woodwork, the electricity, the plumbing. Sometimes a major overhauling is required; sometimes, only subtle refinements.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer summed this all up at the beginning of the *Cost of Discipleship*: "When Christ calls a person," he wrote, "he bids him come and die." Those words were prophetic for Bonhoeffer himself. He was hanged by the Nazis on April 9, 1945, just a few days before the Allied liberation of his prison camp.

The recurring Lenten season nudges us each year toward self-denial. The real point of ascetical practices is not merely to "give up" objects, but to reconstruct one's deepest self so that God might take fuller possession of our home. Jesus asks that the same energy we might have used in accumulating riches, consolidating power, or pursuing personal pleasure be channeled toward the building up of a "new person" as a dwelling place for God. In us who are missionaries, God wants to create not only a home for the divine in-dwelling, but a refuge for the poor. What renovations must we make this Lent for God and for the poor? What must we remove? What must we add? Do we need to rip down some inner walls to provide more quiet prayer space? Do we need to modify a facade that is forbidding-looking, so that the poor will enter more readily?

A millennium and a half ago, John Chrysostom put it this way:

Paint the house of your soul with simplicity and humility and make it splendid with the light of justice. Adorn it with the beaten gold of good works and, for walls and stones, embellish it carefully with faith and generous love. Above all, place prayer on top of this house as its roof so that the complete building may be ready for the Lord. Thus he will be received into a splendid royal home and, by grace, his image will already be settled in your soul.

That is surely wonderful Lenten advice. May your own house, refurbished this Lent, turn out to be beautiful!

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior

General

